

NEW POLITICAL AGENDAS

THE NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION IN SWEDEN

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Abstract: This presentation deals with the National Day Celebration from a political perspective. In 2004 the Swedish government decided to declare the Swedish National Day a public holiday. The decision was surprising to many Swedes, especially those many who perceive Swedish society to be a multicultural society. What arguments were used to motivate the decision? What was said in the political discussion preceding the decision, and what does the discussion in itself represent? This paper will answer these questions and also relate how the decision was received by the general public, and how the celebration has been staged – and not staged – from 2005 onwards.

Keywords: politics, multiculturalism, public holiday

From 2005 on, there has been a law in Sweden that the national day on June 6, is a public holiday. The decision was taken in the Swedish Parliament in 2004, after an official report. A group of people, politicians, lawyers, economists, experts on the labor market and other experts had been working on this report for a year. They suggested that the National Day, which before 1983 was called “the day of the Swedish flag”, should be a public holiday from 2005 on, replacing the Whit Monday as a public holiday.

This group of experts were very particular, for example when deciding which other holiday should disappear – it was not a question of giving us an extra day free from work. There were strict calculations of what the costs would be in that case, namely 0.3% of our gross national budget. Whit Monday was found to be the most advisable holiday to take away. Alternatives were the Ascension Day and Twelfth Day (Epiphany), but those alternatives were considered less advisable, for religious reasons and, for Twelfth Day, for economic reasons. If Twelfth Day were to become a working day, it would be very negative for ski tourism. Thus, the arguments were in many ways strictly economic and not so much nationalistic feelings.

Why the sixth of June? What are we celebrating? One of our kings, Gustav Vasa, was elected king on that day in 1523, which meant that Sweden’s union with Denmark ceased. Besides, we got a new Constitution Act on that day in 1809. Probably most Swedes have no idea about that, much less care about it.

How were this new law and the new public holiday received? First, in the parliament there were politicians who were against it. Two female politicians, one from the liberal party and one from the centre party, said: Gustav Vasa was a tyrant, why should he be celebrated? He burnt books, monasteries and nunneries – it would be better to pay attention to the franchise reform. Others, too, wanted the parliament to reject the suggestion. They said: We claim it is important to work against an ideology of the nation based on ethnicity, language and cultural heritage. Instead we ought to emphasize multiethnic society. To work for a National Day, with its historical background in a stupid nationalism would be a step in the wrong direction.

Another problem that was pointed out is that Whit Monday is always on a Monday, but the national Day is sometimes on a Saturday or a Sunday – this meant an extension of working time.

Ordinary people were most of all surprised, because the National Day means so little to most people. I think that the reason for this is the Swedish self-image that Sweden is a modern, or even postmodern, country, a welfare state where all the ideas of modernity, according to Peter Berger, Stephen Toulmin and other modernity scholars, like individualism, freedom, rationality, secularization and abstraction, dominate. A country where different ethnicities, religions and sexual preferences are accepted and protected by the law, where parents have paid parental leave for almost two years and fathers often are seen taking care of babies, an equal, internationally oriented country – and now this confusing idea about making the National Day, which so few people care about, a public holiday! Singing the national anthem and waving the flag was supposed to be deported to the lumber-room of history, wasn't it? With a very important exception of course: sport events.

But. Even if we recognize Sweden as a modern or rather postmodern, multi-cultural, relatively equal society, there was at the time also another background. The politicians, that is the parliament and the government – and many debaters as well as ordinary people – were scared by the fact that Sweden had some racist movements in the nineties, using the national symbols including the flag in shameless ways. In 1988 a political party, the Sweden democrats, was founded. This party has its roots in nationalistic, extremely right and even racist movements, but is today not a racist party. It has been moving towards the political main stream, however critical of immigration and very culturally conservative, and the party still emphasizes so called Swedish values. From 2010 on, it has been represented in the Swedish parliament after an election when they got 5.7% of the votes. In the beginning of the nineties some spectacular attacks against immigrants were committed by a person called "the laserman" and that was the first really public racist crimes in Sweden in modern times. One person was killed and nine hurt for the rest of their lives. The victims had in common that they had dark hair and looked "foreign".

So, now the political establishment wanted to take the flag and the other national symbol from the hands of racists and right-extreme movements and

build a new type of national pride, in order to disarm the racist movements and to make this pride include all groups in the country, minorities as well as the majority group (whatever that is).

As I said before, the most common reaction was a big 'why?' Our colleagues at the archive in Gothenburg made a questionnaire in 2005 to ask people what they thought about the National Day becoming a public holiday and how they celebrated. The answers express, with few exceptions, frustration. Let me give some testimony:

Nurse, 50 years old: "Very bad timing for a National Day. Our Norwegian friends leave Norway on 17th of May because of all the drinking and the chauvinism. I work on the National Day and I don't care. The first of May and Midsummer are much nicer holidays. Nationalism is not good. We live in an international world."

Female teacher, age unknown: "I tried to find some small flags. It's nice with the Swedish flag. I looked on TV but it wasn't very fun. The Sweden costume – this depressing fancy-dress. It was much better when Whit Monday was a public holiday. We don't become dizzy from nationalism, except for the Olympic Games and World Championships. We don't feel that Sweden has been questioned as a nation. We have not been occupied. We don't have a day when we became free." On the other hand, this woman says that we really can be happy: "we live in a democracy, every child can go to school, we get health care and we have freedom of speech."

Another female teacher, 55, says it was better before this day became a public holiday, because we used to sing the "hockeysong" with the children. (The hockeysong is our national anthem, called the hockeysong because it is heard when our national icehockey team "Tre kronor" has won!) Nationalism should not be encouraged, she says, and what are the reasons for this day? We have seen enough of nationalism and regionalism in Europe during the last years. Is this an attempt to show a Swedish homogeneity which has never been there? Are they afraid that Swedish culture will disappear? Locked-in culture is dead culture."

A student, 22 years: "This is a way to make people work more. It is ridiculous. I don't feel any pride or right of possession to the country where I was born. I don't feel more fellow-feeling for Swedes than for any person. I hope for a multicultural, multisexual, multitrade Sweden full of nuances in the future!"

An elderly woman says: "Except for religion, nationalism has caused most wars in the world."

A different voice from an elderly man: "This celebration is solemn, and it is important that the Swedish people have such a day to honor this country's freedom and greatness."

Another gentleman: "I want to show Swedishness, that I am proud of my country. We owe many for much concerning our dear country. We have good social welfare, we have been spared from wars. Our royal house is a fine symbol, they make good publicity for Sweden."

Thus, for one person our long period of peace is a reason to celebrate the National Day, and for another person it is a reason not to celebrate.

But the celebration goes on every year, even if we can ask ourselves how come? I personally don't know one single person who celebrates this day, but the government, the court, and the local authorities go on celebrating and there are people coming to listen to speeches and to music. During the last month or so I have been asking people around me – friends, colleagues, relatives: How will you celebrate the National Day this year? And I have not yet met one single person who has said anything else than: "The National Day? No idea, I don't celebrate that day." But if I ask: What will you do at Midsummer? I know the answers, often rather detailed: "I will meet friends and go to a party in the archipelago. I will go to relatives and celebrate with them in their summerhouse. We are invited to a wedding. We make our own maypole, then we go to the old homestead museum, listen to the music, look at the folkdance, the children dance around the maypole and we meet people. In the evening we have a party with friends and family, we eat pickled herring, have snaps (Schnaps) and of course strawberries."

If you visit Stockholm on a Midsummer Evening, I guarantee that you will find an empty city with many closed restaurants and very few people, except for some confused and surprised tourists. Everyone is planning for something on Midsummer Day, but the National Day can very well be a day for cleaning the house, working in the garden or doing just nothing special at all. Going to IKEA to buy new wardrobes, maybe.

However, the National Day is a very important day for at least one family in Sweden, the royal family. On that day, Queen Silvia, Crown Princess Victoria and Princess Madeleine, if she happens to be in Sweden, wear the so called Sweden costume. This costume was created by an upper-class woman, together with artists, in 1902, for women in Sweden and Norway coming from cities or areas without real folk costumes. The purpose was to create a comfortable and nationalistic costume, instead of the uncomfortable and unpractical French fashion. However, it was soon forgotten, but in the nineteen-seventies the Nordic Museum acquired one. By wearing it on the National Day, Queen Silvia has made it a little more popular in the last years, but still you cannot see it very often.

Skansen, the big open-air museum in Sweden where this day is celebrated with the royal family among others, already played an important role before we had a National Day. As early as 1893 there was a celebration at the museum on the 6th of June, and in 1916 it became "The day of the Swedish flag". Before that, the flag was used mostly for military purposes and not in public like today.

The flag and the royal family are the most important national symbols on the National Day, and those symbols have grown stronger during the last decades, even though investigations show that the confidence in the Swedish royal family, and specially in the king, is lower than ever. This became obvious through an opinion poll in 2012.

So, what shall we do with this day which is more or less forced upon us?

This day has got a character of an official day, not of spontaneous festivities. The local authorities, the royal court, the government and organizations like Rotary, Red Cross, societies of local history, and home guards are those who

make arrangements for the citizens, with a fascinating mixture of solemnity and high spirits. There can be parades with old cars and old tractors, folk music and folkdance of course, but also entertainment for the kids.

When I say that The National Day has a character of an official day and not a day for celebrating with the family and friends, and definitely not very spontaneous celebrations, I include that this also has become a day for new Swedish citizens. Most local governments have chosen this day to welcome new Swedes, which we can see here from the City Hall in Sweden. Maybe this day is the Swedish National Day for immigrants, new Swedes, while Midsummer is looked upon as the “real” National Day by native Swedes.

To conclude: The National Day has so far mainly been ruled by different authorities and organizations, but it is not deeply rooted among ordinary people.

Swedes seem to be unwilling and unable to subscribe to nationalistic enthusiasm except when “we” have won a World Championship in skisport or ice-hockey – and after an icehockey match we really wish to hear the players sing the “hockeysong”.

This year, ten years after the decision, the Institute of Language and Folklore will make a new questionnaire to find out more about how the National Day is celebrated – or not celebrated today.